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ABSTRACT

This Digest discusses how to integrate basic public speaking concepts into college students' personal and professional lives. The Digest first considers the relevance of the basic course and then suggests the application speech as one instructional activity which illustrates how the oral communication concepts presented in the basic course are inherent in all communication situations. The Digest outlines the activity and discusses its positive instructional impact. The Digest also offers an alternate activity, specifically a small group exercise, and suggests a group final exam for public speaking which focuses on practical applications. (NKA)

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Taking Personal and Professional Contexts into Account in the Basic Public Speaking Course

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by Mary Mino

The basic course in communication skills is an integral part of the college and university curriculum--instruction in speaking and listening competencies is one of the essential features of a minimum required curriculum for a coherent undergraduate education (Ford and Wolvin, 1993).

This *Digest* will consider how to more effectively integrate basic public speaking concepts into students' personal and professional lives.

Relevance of Public Speaking

When teaching the basic public speaking course, instructors most often focus their efforts on presenting the theory and describing the mechanics involved in the public speaking process (Gibson et al., 1985; Johnson and Szczupakiewicz, 1987). Rarely do instructors effectively clarify the rationale for how basic public speaking course content is useful in "real life" contexts (Mino, 1988). Consequently, students often question the relevance of enrolling in a public speaking course because they fail to see the connection between learning public speaking skills and applying these skills in real life situations. In fact, Ford and Wolvin (1993) contend that very few students see any connection between learning public speaking skills and applying them beyond the classroom. They recommend that instructors should try to determine how to better deliver public speaking training so that it impacts on students' personal, academic, and professional lives.

Frymier and Shulman (1995) are among the researchers who have studied the concept of "relevance," which they have defined as "student perception of whether the course instruction/content satisfies personal needs, personal goals, and/or career goals."

Application Speech

The application speech is one instruction activity that helps students discover the relevance of the basic public speaking course. Specifically, the speech illustrates how the oral communication concepts presented in the basic course are inherent in *all* communication situations.

Activity Outline

The instructor describes and assigns this ungraded activity prior to students' final graded speeches. Because students need to practice communicating with an audience and are often anxious about public speaking, this activity allows them to practice using their public speaking skills without the pressure of "a grade." The instructor should provide for each student a written or oral critique that focuses on basic communication skills such as audience analysis, organization, evidence, and delivery. These critiques not only acquaint students with the instructor's critiquing style but also share with students their performance strengths and weaknesses. Understanding their strengths and weaknesses as public speakers gives students an advantage when preparing graded assignments.

Instructors should allow students time to prepare for this speech. The assignment is described during one class session early in the semester and scheduled for one or two classes (depending on student enrollment) later on. Students are asked to:

- Review basic speaking concepts such as listening, audience analysis, organization, evidence, and delivery.
- Select a concept or concepts. Think about when, where, how, and how often you use the concept or concepts in your personal or professional life.
- Prepare an organized two-to-three minute speech that clearly illustrates how a concept or concepts apply to you in personal and/or professional situations.
- There is no need to conduct formal research for this assignment. Develop your speech using real or hypothetical examples based on your own personal experiences or perceptions.

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Instructional Impact

This activity appears to have a positive impact on students during all stages of the assignment.

While preparing for their application speeches, students often comment about personal or professional contexts where public speaking concepts apply and how they did not realize the relevance of learning these concepts before preparing for this assignment.

When presenting the speeches, students share cogent examples that describe for their classmates the utility or value of basic public speaking course concepts in numerous personal and professional contexts.

Reactions continue after the speeches are presented. One striking example involves a student who apologized to his audience for his comment he had made about the course. He said, "I told you how worthless it was to take a public speaking course on the first day of class. After all, we talk all the time and we aren't going to be professional public speakers. Why learn about it? But all through this assignment I thought about how public speaking involves learning to speak--in public--with all listeners. It makes an impression on my family, my friends, my boss, my classmates, and my professors. Why not take it and take time to learn, as our professor puts it, 'to orally communicate effectively in all situations.'"

Donald E. Novak would be in agreement with this student's "feedback." Going beyond the basic course and working with upper level undergraduates, Novak (1992) has developed a speech communication course which involves student collaboration with community entities, a course about which he says: "The challenge of this course is to enable students to understand the real-world workings of applied communication and how they can use what they have learned in the undergraduate program to bring about change in their and other's communication choices...it educates students for life while helping them to see the practical application of what they have learned."

Group Exercises

Some instructors favor group exercises and collaboration to enhance relevance--they feel that group activities (especially experimental learning exercises) which actually produce something closely emulate an actual job, but in a low risk setting (Mandeville, 1994). The exercise developed by Mandeville involves the manufacture of a simple product using paper as the base material with the employment of basic office tools, but the focus is really the discovery of how to improve group communication skills.

Glaser (1995) elaborated a final examination for a basic public speaking course for honors students which featured group discussion and which also focuses on practical applications. The students had to agree on a topic which they would be happy to discuss over a 2-hour period, and individual preparation for the group discussion had to be rigorous and structured so that the discussion could be free flowing and allow for a valid assessment. For a modification, Glaser is considering assigning positions to the class to ensure a variety of perspectives and a more interesting discussion. The cooperative aspect of the class and the final exam mirrors the cooperation needed in real world situations, especially in an increasingly multicultural workplace.

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